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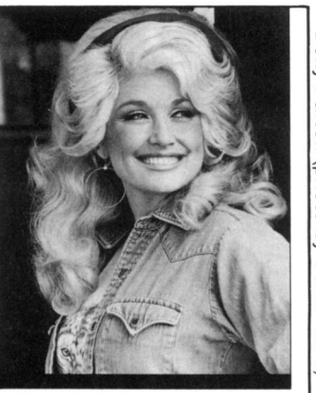
CEO and Cinderella

AN INTERVIEW WITH DOLLY PARTON

by Karen Jaehne



Dolly Parton (photo by David Gahr)

A recent Variety *headline hollered "Sentimental Parton buying radio station," with a shadow-box report that Dolly Parton is purchasing WSEV-AM/FM, the radio station where she launched her career at the age of 9 by taping two songs called "Puppy Love" and "Girl Left Alone." Funny how the usually astute biz-sense of* Variety *evaporates in the heat of Dolly Parton's unusually astute business sense! Hold that thought.*

Dolly Parton is not just a movie star. She's a celebrity in any popular medium you can think of, a cross between Daisy Mae and Mae West. Her career has its grass roots in country music. She lit up Porter Wagoner's popular TV show and recorded several hits with him (including "The Last Thing on my Mind") until 1974, when she became independent of him and cultivated a steady following through the Seventies, achieving a crossover in 1977 with "Here You Come Again."

In 1980 an auspicious film debut in 9 to 5 *surprised critics prepared to shred her as an over-engineered C&W Barbie Doll out of her depth with the likes of Jane Fonda and Lily Tomlin. She held her own, however, as the best celluloid secretary since Judy Holliday in* Born Yesterday *(A sec'etary . . ? Yestuhday I couldn't spell it, today I yam one.")*

Parton boldly denies ambitions to act but likes to play off her 'Dolly' persona when it fits comfortably into a role. In 1982, she inflated the gold-hearted floozy side of Dolly and romped through the happily risqué Best Little Whorehouse in Texas, *rounding out the film soundtrack from the Broadway hit with two of her own songs—a privilege accorded few such celebrities.*

What makes Parton so likable on screen is her unabashed enjoyment of the whole shebang, which diminishes her chances of being taken seriously by film critics. Rhinestone *(1984) almost justified such snobbism. Indeed, a thankless role opposite Sylvester Stallone had her playing Pygmalion, turning taxi driver Sly into a country crooner on a bet. The odds were against her, in every sense, and today her only comment is, "I can't remember, has Sylvester Stallone spoken to me since then?"*

The experience made her camera-shy until Steel Magnolias *(1989), with its roots in a life and town very much like Parton's background. The role of Truvy was close to her, very close. It did not* restore *her to her country home, however, because in some sense, she'd never left it.*

Parton's sense of obligation to the impoverished Tennessee county she came from led to the Dollywood Foundation, which is supported by six months of concerts at her Dollywood Theme Park. Parton is part-time executive, part-time creative artist, cutting records, vetting movie offers, developing TV shows, appearing on New Year's Eve at Harrah's Lake Tahoe, then back to Nashville to her husband and family or to her New York apartment with its tasteful leather sofa and glass tables. One busy gal.

Sitting high above Central Park, watching her consume Campbell's Chicken Noodle Soup and cheerfully chatter about her schedule and hopes and hair and songs and spelling snafus is like watching Cinderella at 12:01—sort of glad it's over but worried about the price of that slipper. She has a definitive female logic that juxtaposes babies and broadcasting without batting an artificial eyelash. Her sentences often tilt up into questions to be sure we understand her riff on the Horatio Alger myth.

Thus, reports of Parton's acquisition of the air waves simply sounds like another smart move in the vertical integration of 'Dolly Parton, Tart Tycoon,' a naughty image she has unbridled on the pop culture world without fear of losing her legions of Nashville fans. By expanding her empire into radio—and reportedly moving that station to her theme park Dollywood (which is starting to compete with the Grand Ole Opry on the music scene)—she can expand the audience for the talent performing there.

Clearly, there's an enterprising and savvy businesswoman beneath those piles of curls and patina of peroxide. Dolly means business, a business far larger than folks hung up on stereotypes would believe. The tourist-attraction theme park, in turn, supports the Dollywood Foundation, which liberally supports the health, education, and welfare of Sevier County. This philanthropic side reassures us that her heart of gold is 24K and that she has a sense of noblesse oblige appropriate to Hollywood's uncrowned royalty.

Dolly Parton's career has gone through almost as many phases as Jane Fonda's, but political opinions have never guided her. While some might feel the need to address larger political issues from a pedestal of popularity, Parton does not claim the expertise to address any problems beyond the community she now considers home. Her 'Country' style is simply not subject to political trends or cultural fads. There's something comforting about that: Dolly remains the spunky little gal who knows how to throw her curves in the right direction. Her strongest asset is undoubtedly her wit and wink at the world of show biz, betraying a self-knowledge she once said made her "too country to be Country."
—Karen Jaehne

Cineaste: *Your image has a very strong popular appeal. Does it have limitations? Or ever get in your way?*
Dolly Parton: My image get in my way? Ya gotta be crazy. It's my image that gets me most everything I want. I created the whole thing. My gimmick and my look, it all comes from a very serious place. Country girl plays dress up . . . To a lotta folks, I'm Cinderella, but I don't think anybody who talked to me seriously for very long finds me anything but gen-you-wine. Think of me as your sister all dolled up an' goin' somewhere . . . these days, usually back home to Dollywood.

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Dolly Parton and Shirley MacLaine in *Steel Magnolias*

Cineaste: *Tell me about Dollywood.*
Parton: Well, I'm awful proud of it, so you'll have to forgive me if it sounds like I'm talking about a grandchild or something. Dollywood is a theme park, a pretty simple idea, really. For years, that was such a poor area, but it's a very beautiful part of the country. The Great Smoky Mountains National Park is the most visited park in the United States, a fact not a lotta people realize. We get ten million visitors every single year and have for many, many years. We get a couple million of those spilling over into Dollywood now all the time.

Since about 1983, Dollywood has done a lot for that whole area, pumping millions of dollars into it. It's provided so many jobs and not just Dollywood itself, but all of Sevier County has new hotels, restaurants, and services for all these people. It seems that everybody's profited from it, even the tourists, because y'know Dollywood has given them something to do besides just going through the campgrounds. It's a very good feeling to see the prosperity take hold and give people a new outlook.
Cineaste: *What's the relationship between Dollywood and the Dollywood Foundation?*
Parton: Dollywood the theme park is open May through October and pays for itself just fine, with a good bit to reinvest and upgrade things. But all the proceeds from the concerts at Dollywood go to the Foundation. It focuses on the young people of Sevier County, providing scholarships and just making sure in a lot of different ways that they get an education.
Cineaste: *Is it true that the Dollywood Foundation guarantees scholarships to every graduating senior of all three high schools in the county?*
Parton: Well, those schools aren't that big, 'specially by the time those kids are gettin' out. Here's how it works. It's the 8th and 9th graders we've made this deal with called the Buddy Plan. Two kids team up, and if they both graduate, they get $1,000. We have a hot line that they can call for counseling, if the buddy can't keep them in school. Back home the dropout rate's so bad they don't know it's dropout. A lot of the kids' parents never went to school, so it doesn't seem to be very important to them. A lot of people are very poor. They don't have proper clothes or proper books or enough to eat to afford school. So our college scholarship program is really to get them through high school, because sometimes they have to quit so they can help get together food and clothes for other children in the family.
Cineaste: *Tell us about your family and growing up there.*
Parton: Well that's the reason that educational aid program is real close to my heart. My own father never went to school a day in his life. My own daddy can't read or write. My dad is a really smart person, and he's done great looking after all twelve of us. I've seen how hard it's been for him, and I've always wondered just what Old Daddy could have been, if he'd had any kind of an education.
Cineaste: *What motivated you then?*
Parton: Maybe I just wanted to be the first . . .? It was hard for me, too, you know, in a family that big, but I really wanted it, and I was the first person in my family to ever graduate from high school. My folks sure wanted me to, but it meant giving up things other family members needed. I just had the spunk and guts to get out and do it, and I sure'd rather study than go do some piddlin' job like so many gals. I have a sister and two brothers older, but eight young'uns after me took a lot of lookin' after. So I

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9 to 5

just figured out the best way I could do that in the long run was finish school.

Cineaste: *When did you develop your business sense?*

Parton: From my dad. I tell you he's smart and I get my focus and ambition and willingness to work from Daddy. My mother's people are dreamers, very creative but sometimes pretty lazy, just wanting to sing and write and not have to do the real hard part that goes with the music business. I think I got a good combination. My dad gets up early and never stops working—that's what I'm like. I've always been an early bird. I truly do believe that the early bird gets the worm.

Cineaste: *Your family must be incredibly proud of you.*

Parton: They're proud of all their kids. It's always amazed people that it didn't seem to make a whit of difference to them about the money and fame. They're the kinda folks who know if you're doing the right thing and happy doing it, then the rest is gravy. They try hard to make us all feel equally loved—and that's a tricky one, I'd think. But my family has been my mainstay all these years.

Cineaste: *You must have some kind of dynasty there!*

Parton: Sorta!! A lotta my momma's people are in the music business, and they almost all work in the park at Dollywood. And a lot of other relatives do different things, not necessarily in the show business end of it. Services and things. We need them and they need us. I believe you gotta give something back, and this is my way of doin' it.

Cineaste: *Education is the main thrust, then?*

Parton: Yes, but the foundation is involved in a lot of programs in Tennessee. We're very concerned about the health of the community, and donate a lot of money to the Dr. Robert F. Thomas Foundation of the Sevier County Hospital. Dr. Thomas was a Methodist preacher from up North who came down there—he was called the Angel of the Smoky Mountains—and delivered most of the babies. Six of us were born at home, and Dr. Thomas delivered us, so I wrote a song for him years ago. He was a great doctor and preacher, riding through those mountains on horseback to bring me into the world back in 1946. His dream was to have the Mayo Clinic of the South; and in his hospital now, we have a great burn center and poison center and all kinds of research going on.

I do so much charity work around the country, and I'm always glad to do it, but most of my energy is devoted to Appalachia, because to me charity begins at home. I'm no society matron out there passin' the hat in mew-zee-ums . . . ! I care about keeping things going so we can educate our kids and keep our folks healthy.

Cineaste: *Sounds like you're ready to become governor. Do you have any political ambitions?*

Parton: I don't get involved in politics, unless it's to walk up to the governor and tell him we need a new road up to the hospital or a new wing. I'm fulla shit enough, without tryin' to get involved in professional politics. I don't wanna get caught at it like the politicians do. I do want to be involved enough to be able to go tell them what we need. I speak out for the people, but runnin' for office mucks that up.

Cineaste: *But being an actress doesn't hurt, does it?*

Parton: I s'pose it depends on what you're actin' in. I've always liked actin' I guess, but I don't pretend to be no Sarah Bernhardt. My most recent film, *Steel Magnolias*, is the one I'm proudest of. It's based on a Broadway hit, which is important for someone like me—as it was with *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas*—'cause it means that the characters have already been worked like good clay, so I trust myself to those roles. A good director helps, too.

I play Truvy and it's my beauty shop where everything goes on. She's the kinda gal I'd have been if I'd never left home. I'd a been something like a beautician, 'cause I just love all the makeup, fingernails, hair, and stuff. I always say that a lotta gals got as many wigs and getups as I do, but they don't wear 'em all at once. Seriously, it was not far from who I am, but she's got a great attitude, full of fun and jokes. She has to keep peace a lotta the time by just foolin' and jokin' around, and that's a role I sure know. Runnin' a beauty parlor in a little town like in *Steel Magnolias* is like bein' a psychiatrist—only you look better when it's over.

Look at me! If I got any charm at all, it's that I look totally phony, but I am totally real. That's my magic.

Cineaste: *There were stories that made the set sound like a snake pit.*

Parton: Everybody wanted to think we were a bunch of wranglin' women just to confirm some crazy sexism, in my opinion. We went through the same thing making *9 to 5* with Jane [Fonda] and Lily [Tomlin] . . . they made up stories about us tearin' each other's hair out. It was all hooey.

We had more trouble with Herbert [Ross], the director. He got to thinking if all these gals ganged up on him, he'd be a goner, like most men who aren't used to being around a lot of women. He was defensive at first, thinking he had to be harder on us than usual. When we got into the shoot, he realized, these are grown women who get along just fine without me. He musta figured out we were mostly too old and ugly to be in tough competition with each other.

Daryl Hannah was the prettiest, and her whole part was wearing thick glasses and convincing herself she was not too swift. Julia Roberts was pretty and sweet, but she wasn't gonna kick up a fuss like the press was hopin', so they just made it up, like they always do. I like women. I like *working* with women.

Olympia Dukakis was wonderful as the daffy mayor's

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wife. And Shirley MacLaine plays Ouiser, a rich, eccentric old coot, and she is so funny. She just kept us laughin'. Some tabloid ran a picture of Sally Fields and Shirley saying, "Shirley Devastated 'Cause Sally Says Shove It"—funnier than a flea circus!

We heard all the local gossip and were the center of a great deal of it. Especially me. They were sayin' that people were knockin' on my door tryin' to get in, and I took to the hills and rented a house in the woods. That finally I had to go to Shreveport and commute by helicopter. Such lies! I sat there in Natchitoches with my feet on my kitchen table readin' all about it.

Cineaste: *Did you have any big discovery in making this film?*

Parton: Yea! Coupla things! Daryl Hannah was the big surprise to me. She's beautiful and sweet as anything, but lord, what an actress. She plays this nerd with dingy religious ideas. I had no idea what a great talent that girl had, 'cause I'd always thought of her as the pretty, long-legged blonde, y'know, getting' my head into the same kind of stereotyped thinkin' that annoys me when it happens to me. Daryl takes her acting very seriously and has a curious intelligence and intuition about her. Rare.

Cineaste: *Isn't Natchitoches where the actual events happened? Did you take advantage of that to research your roles?*

Parton: More than you can think. Liz, who owned the original beauty shop, was there, and I got to know her. She's a dark-haired older woman, and I don't know what she thought of someone like me playing her, but some undercurrent there made me aware of how I was playing this very real woman. And I think the others had similar experiences.

They used a lot of local people as extras for crowd scenes for the wedding and funeral, and they came up and told us during the filming of, say, the reception, how the real reception had been. It became very personal. It meant so much to the local people, it was very important how we recreated their lives. Out of that came a kind of feeling that you'll see in the movie, if you're sensitive to the psychology of small towns.

I felt it a lot, because I grew up in a town like that. I skedaddled outta there, too. Everybody knew what you were gonna do weeks before you did it. But what I do like about country folks is the way they ask their questions straight but know *when* not to ask. You have to know that when you're on location diggin' into lives for this big Hollywood product.

Cineaste: *You have a very disarming frankness. It must get you in trouble sometimes.*

Parton: I'm the kind of person you can *ask* anything. I'll give you *my* opinion, and whether it's right or not you gotta decide. If people ask me something that I feel is too personal, rather than tell a lie or talk around it, I tell 'em it's none of their business and change the subject.

Cineaste: *Patricia Resnick* [screenwriter of *9 to 5*—ed.] *says you are an original, and one of the most "real" people in Hollywood. What would you say to that?*

Parton: Well, I like her too, because she tailored that script for us so everything felt real comfortable. But I am more real than meets the eye, and she could understand that. I think *interesting* people are this way, y'know? They got this public self, and they're smart enough to know it and still know their real self.

Cineaste: *You don't look like you've changed much over the years, but your career has had a lot of phases . . .*

Parton: Hold on! I've lost twenty-five pounds, and that's not a change? It's just that success didn't go to my head, it went straight to mah ass. Who needs to show off that much success? Seriously, what you're gettin' at is that I like to do a lot of different things—recording, touring, and

The Best Little Whorehouse in Texas

feeling that special closeness to ordinary people who come to hear you. I'll never get over that thrill that they like so much what I do.

If a good role comes along, I like makin' a movie, but it takes *sooo* long. For efficiency, I prefer TV, and I'm working on a sitcom idea. I learned a lot from my last series, but we were all glad when the season was done and agreed that it shouldn't continue. The people I was working with just did not see eye-to-eye with me on the whole concept. And it's my career at stake. They can go on to mess up somebody else. I'm just a one-night-stand kinda girl about TV. It's fast and done with, and you move on.

Cineaste: *Do you consider yourself a feminist?*

Parton: If you mean by that, am I an independent woman, you better believe it. Just ask my husband. We've got no kids—I can't have any—and he doesn't want me being anything but what I am. He's busy with his own work—he moves heavy equipment, develops land, sells it, can't pick a guitar, nope—and he don't want me gettin' in his face anymore than I do.

We're both independent as a deaf drummer. Been together twenty-five years but he's no fan of mine. He respects me, but never liked any o' my movies. He's from a small, reserved Nashville family, so my clan's been this weird trip for him. We take some gettin' used to. I'll always be with him, because he don't run my life. I may have married him when I was young—I met him my first day in Nashville, barely twenty-four hours outta high school—but I'd been earning a living as a kid. I already had a record label and they didn't want me to get married 'cause of my career, so, as usual, I had to go out and do my own thing, no matter who it suited. And I been doin' it ever since. ■

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